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Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by Education International, International Trade Union Confederation and Public Services International, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

The economic empowerment of rural women workers through rights at work, education and public investment

Education International, International Trade Union Confederation and Public Services International recognize the contribution of women to growing, processing and preparing food and, in particular, the contribution of women on family farms to ensuring global food security, which is key, knowing that today 1 billion people are living in hunger. We welcome measures to ensure that women have access to and ownership of land and have access to credit, markets, technology and all measures that empower and assist them in eradicating poverty and hunger. The situation of rural women workers, in particular in agriculture, also needs to be addressed. They are all too frequently ignored by researchers and academics, policymakers and legislators. The global trade union movement calls for specific measures to ensure the economic, social and political empowerment of all rural women workers, including access to public goods, legal and social protection, and public investment in social and physical infrastructure and effective service delivery. This is most urgently needed: out of the 1.4 billion people living in extreme poverty (i.e., on less than $1.25 per day), 1 billion are in rural areas.

Employment of women in agriculture

Agriculture remains a significant employment sector. In 1991, 45.2 per cent of total employment was in agriculture, but by 2007 that share had fallen to 34.9 per cent. Women make up 41.3 per cent of the total and work across all agricultural sectors. They work as day labourers, seasonal workers and migrant workers, on plantations and in pack houses, glasshouses and cold stores, although the percentage of the workforce they constitute varies and job classifications are often gender-defined. In the tea sector, which employs millions of workers globally, women are the largest segment of the workforce. In the banana industry they are mainly confined to pack houses. In newer crop industries, such as cut flowers and export horticulture, women make up a majority of the workforce in both harvesting and packing.

Current challenges

Agriculture is, regrettably, characterized by significant decent work deficits. Agricultural workers are often denied access to even the most basic of rights covered in the core conventions of the International Labour Organization (ILO), on freedom of association and the right to bargain collectively, the elimination of all forms of discrimination, equality at work and the elimination of child labour and bonded and forced labour. In addition, according to the 2008 ILO report entitled "Promotion of rural employment for poverty reduction", labour inspection is often non-existent or weak.

Women in particular face inequalities when trying to access decent work. For instance, owing to practices of employers who offer women short-term contracts

Note: The statement has been prepared in partnership with International Union of Food Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations, an organization on the Roster.

and/or demand a pregnancy test before offering employment, women workers cannot exercise their right to maternity benefits.

Apart from the multiple roles women have as household managers and family carers, as organizers and providers of community services and in the economy, rural women workers in particular have the longest working day. The unequal sharing of family responsibilities between women and men and the absence of quality public services lead to excessive hours of paid and unpaid work for women and limit women's access to paid work.

The low participation and representation of women in decision-making in rural areas, a problem more acute in rural areas than in urban areas, inevitably leads to biases in priorities, policies and programmes.

Further, agriculture ranks as one of the most dangerous industries. Injuries and fatalities are common, often leading to incapacity or death, which plunge families deeper into poverty. Women working in packhouses and the cut flower industry often contract upper limb disorders through repetitive work and poor workstations.

Evidence gathered by trade unions indicates that sexual harassment is widespread, especially when women are on temporary contracts or piece rates. Employers often demand sexual favours before renewing contracts and/or paying full entitlements.

Use of child labour in rural areas is widespread, with agriculture being the biggest user across all sectors. ILO estimates that 60 per cent of all child labour is in agriculture. This means that 132 million girls and boys aged 5 to 14 are working in agriculture, often doing work that is hazardous to their health and/or interferes with their education.

The severe decent work deficits of women and men rural workers, as well the existence of child labour, need to be effectively addressed in rural employment and poverty reduction programmes and policies.

In addition, providing rural workers with access to social protection must be a priority. It is an important step towards the formalization of their working situation. The Commission on the Status of Women must express support for the conclusions of the ILO general discussion on social protection that took place during the 100th session of the International Labour Conference and for the report of the ILO Social Protection Floor Advisory Group chaired by Michelle Bachelet, entitled "Social protection floor for a fair and inclusive globalization". Governments must set up social protection floors, with the technical support of ILO, to make sure that female rural workers are effectively covered. The role of the social partners is crucial in building a social protection floor for rural working women.

Empowering rural women through public investment

Privatization and the reduction of the role of the State in economic life have had an acute impact on the lives of women in rural areas. Because of their specific productive and reproductive roles and position within society, rural women have been among the worst affected by cuts in social spending, where substantial costs have been shifted from the State to the household.

There are few rural areas where the demand for health and care services, including for the prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS, water, sanitation and

transport services and access to energy supplies is met by existing provisions. As a consequence, rural women have been forced to take on an increasing burden of unpaid work (care tasks, obtaining food, collecting water and firewood, etc.). A World Bank study found that women in rural Africa spend 65 per cent of their time on journeys on foot.

Studies show that women work 12 to 13 hours a week more than men. Improvements in rural infrastructure, such as affordable and safe water, sanitation and energy near the home, and accessible and affordable modes of transport could dramatically improve the "time poverty" of rural women.

The provision of public services in rural areas is also a key driver in the creation of quality jobs for women and men, rural development and the expansion of social protection, which remains non-existent or inadequate in rural areas.

The Monterrey Consensus noted that investments in basic economic and social infrastructure, social services and social protection, including education, health, nutrition, shelter and social security programmes, which were gender sensitive and fully inclusive of the rural sector, were vital for enabling people to adapt to and benefit from changing economic conditions and opportunities.

The United Nations Millennium Project has emphasized the importance of expanding rural access to vital public services and infrastructure in meeting the Millennium Development Goals.

Education is key to the empowerment of girls and women in rural areas

There is universal agreement that economic and political empowerment of women and girls through education is the key to development. Education of women and girls is the most effective means of eliminating child labour, the best remedy against child marriage and the best medicine for improving maternal health.

Despite the obvious benefits of education, data show that in particular poor girls from rural areas and from ethnic minority or indigenous groups have the lowest education and literacy levels: rural location compounds wealth and gender disadvantages, reflecting the impact of cultural attitudes and the unequal burden of household labour. According to *Education for All Global Monitoring Report*, published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization in 2010, among indigenous peoples, poverty and gender discrimination further exacerbate education deprivation. The Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, in her message on the occasion of International Women's Day on 8 March 2011, stated that globally, two thirds of the 796 million illiterate adults are women.

Rural and indigenous women and the environment

Rural and indigenous women's lives and livelihoods are directly threatened by climate change, environmental degradation, militarization, ethnic and religious discrimination and economic policies that make small-scale subsistence farming unsustainable.

Women are affected more severely and are more at risk from natural disasters and extreme weather events, including during post-disaster response efforts. Women's exclusion from decision-making and limited access to and control over

resources impede their rights. In the case of climate change, it means that women's voices are absent from decisions about environmental management, climate change adaptation and mitigation, with long-term consequences for the well-being of women, their families and the sustainability of their communities. It is therefore important to articulate rural and indigenous women's critical role and capacity in the nurturing of a sustainable ecological system.

Rural domestic workers

Millions of women work as domestic workers. In rural areas it is not uncommon for the wife or girl child of an agricultural worker to be expected to "help out" in the employer's household. Their work goes unrecognized, unacknowledged, in particular because it takes place in private households.

Governments fail to extend to domestic workers the rights and benefits that other workers enjoy. Global unions campaigned successfully for the adoption of a new ILO Convention 189, Domestic Workers Convention, 2011. In 2012, their "12 by 12" campaign will aim at the ratification and the implementation of ILO Convention 189 in 12 countries.

Conclusions

Education International, International Trade Union Confederation and Public Services International, supported by International Union of Food Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations, call on Member States at the fifty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women to:

- Ensure that the concept of decent work and the creation of decent jobs are fully incorporated into rural development strategies
- Review, extend and effectively implement national legislation that covers all rural women workers, including agricultural workers, and ratify and implement ILO conventions, including: C110, Plantations Convention; C131, Minimum Wage Fixing Convention; C129, Labour Inspection (Agriculture) Convention; C141, Rural Workers' Organizations Convention; C156, Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention; C138, Minimum Age Convention; and C182, Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention; C183, Maternity Protection Convention; C184, Safety and Health in Agriculture Convention; and C189, Domestic Workers Convention
- Implement the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Beijing Platform of Action and the Millennium Development Goals (on gender equality and women's economic and political empowerment)
- Set up social protection floors with the technical support of ILO to make sure that female rural workers are effectively covered
- Ensure that gender-responsive budgeting, gender mainstreaming and gender-sensitive employment policies are systematically integrated into the design and the implementation of rural development policies, programmes and budgets
- Strengthen rural labour inspection

- Develop innovative communication strategies to ensure that rural women workers are aware of their rights, in particular maternity rights
- Ensure the provision of public quality education free of charge and with adequate facilities, qualified teachers, good sanitation and safe transportation, in order to increase the enrolment and retention of girls in schools and reduce child labour. Incentives for families to send their girls to school, gender-sensitive relevant curricula and textbooks, opportunities for further education and training, and access and entry to the labour market make a difference
- Provide incentives for qualified female teachers to work in rural and isolated areas and introduce measures to ensure their safety
- Develop and combine rural vocational educational training opportunities and qualifications with employment promotion, which is a recognized link between rural employment, poverty reduction and food security
- Establish consultative processes that call for social dialogue with trade unions; create opportunities for rural women to participate fully and effectively in decision-making processes, including development planning.

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Statement submitted by Family Care International, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

Family Care International (FCI) welcomes the theme of the fifty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women: "Empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges", and the review theme on "Financing for gender equality and the empowerment of women", and recognizes their relationship to the issue of reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health. In our work to make pregnancy and childbirth safer in the developing world, we have found that rural women often face greater challenges in accessing the health care they need compared with their urban counterparts.

FCI was the first international organization dedicated to maternal health, having been founded out of a determination to remedy the neglect of women's health and eliminate the barriers to access to care that lead to maternal mortality and morbidity. In rural villages, we work with local partners and communities to raise awareness, create innovative solutions and tools, and implement effective programmes and services that improve maternal and reproductive health outcomes in the communities where women are still dying every day. Our work is designed to empower individuals and strengthen and support civil society.

Each year, more than 350,000 women die from pregnancy-related causes, and an estimated 210 million more suffer injuries or develop lifelong disabilities, including obstetric fistula. Maternal mortality and morbidity are unacceptable reminders of the enormous inequities existing between rich and poor women within countries. Rates of death and disability are higher in rural areas and among poorer and less-educated communities. The reasons why women do not receive the care they need before, during and after childbirth are manifold. If there are services nearby, they are often too expensive or of low quality or insensitive to women's needs. Much of the time, services are not available in rural areas and the ability to access them is limited by cost, poor infrastructure and gender-based barriers to making care-seeking decisions. Maternity care must be improved where the need is greatest — in the rural health centres and dispensaries closest to women — with a focus on crucial components for effective and lifesaving care: strengthening infrastructure, addressing equipment and supply gaps, improving provider skills, strengthening referral systems and strengthening supervision and health service management. These components are necessary to ensure that rural women do not continue to die owing to preventable pregnancy-related factors.

Many rural women are even further discriminated against based on ethnicity, lack of education and cultural bias. Efforts must be intensified to address the needs of these underserved and marginalized women. In Latin America, indigenous women are at higher risk of pregnancy-related suffering. For instance, in Guatemala, where 42 per cent of the population is indigenous, maternal mortality is three times higher among indigenous women than among non-indigenous women; and when services are available, they are often insensitive to the cultural needs and traditions of indigenous women.

Work is needed to ensure the provision of more culturally appropriate and acceptable care, which can in turn increase rural and indigenous women's desire to access skilled care at birth. In poor and remote rural districts in Africa, community-based engagement is key in acquiring services and improving the quality of health care. To respond to local needs, educational tools should be created not just in

English, French and Spanish, but also in the languages of streets and villages — for instance, in Kichwa (an indigenous language of the Andes), Haitian Creole, Swahili (East Africa), Bambara and Fulani (West Africa); or they should be produced using images instead of words, for use in low-literacy communities.

In working with youth, the focus must be on reaching young women who are out of school and desperately need access to information and services. Complications of pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death among adolescent girls in most developing countries. In fact, rural girls are the most disadvantaged group in the developing world: they are much more likely than rural boys and their urban sisters to lack education, access to health services and the means for economic self-sufficiency and have very little decision-making power in their daily lives. As rural environments are often characterized by resistance to change, rural girls also face greater pressures than their urban sisters to adhere to traditional practices and customs, many of which reinforce their subordination, including early marriage (and childbearing) and female genital cutting. Education, means of livelihood and reproductive health have been identified as the three main areas where intervention is essential for the advancement of rural girls' development.

For the goals set at the International Conference on Population and Development and the Fourth World Conference on Women, and the Millennium Development Goals, to be achieved, empowerment of rural women through provision of and access to comprehensive reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health care is key. Such care is a crucial factor in empowering rural women and girls so that they can be healthy and safe and play an active role in their communities and in implementing the larger development agenda.